

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS HARARE 000178

SIPDIS

STATE FOR AF/S AND AF/EX
NSC FOR SENIOR AFRICA DIRECTOR JFRAZER
USDOC FOR 2037 DIEMOND
PASS USTR ROSA WHITAKER
TREASURY FOR ED BARBER AND C WILKINSON
USAID FOR MARJORIE COPSON

E. O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [EFIN](#) [ECON](#) [ZI](#)

SUBJECT: Harare's Commuter Blues

1. Summary: Zimbabwe's foreign exchange shortage has sidelined most passenger vans, transforming a short commute into a twice daily ordeal for residents of Harare's high-density suburbs. 15-30 minute treks now take 2-3 hours, a potential trigger for social unrest. End Summary.

Few vans still operating

2. We recently observed the early morning commute from Harare's townships and the evening return from the city center. Residents tell us their commute has never been as grueling, with most privately-owned vans grounded for want of parts or fuel. Harare is still -- compared with other developing world capitals -- small, sparsely-populated and unchaotic. By private vehicle, it only takes 15-20 minutes to drive downtown from the city's most distant townships. In fact, many residents walk 6-10 kilometers to/from work, although this often takes several hours each way and is obviously less practical for those in professional attire.

Commuter Angst

3. For most, getting a spot in a crowded van is a cheerless and demeaning process. In the morning, we witnessed hoards of commuters, anxious about disciplinary sanctions for tardiness, jockeying with each other for the few vans that pulled up. Many young men hang from fenders and side-mirrors while the old and meek stand little chance. Most vans do not service more distant suburbs like Kuwadzana and Dzivaresekwa, preferring to cash in on more frequent runs between close-in suburbs and downtown. So some commuters say they walk an hour to the close-in suburbs, then wait up to 2 hours for a van to the city. For the evening trip home, the mood turns more somber, with stoic and dejected commuters sitting for hours in curbside lines. Few converse.

4. Commuters say the worst element is uncertainty. A worker who begins at 8:00am might be lucky to get a ride at 5:00am, then arrive at her office at 5:30am with 2.5 hours to kill. The next morning she will retrace her steps and not get a lift until 8:00am. By the late-morning or evening, vans solicit 3-5 times the normal fare from increasingly desperate workers, who tell us employers and supervisors from low-density suburbs are either oblivious or unsympathetic to their transport woes.

Comment

5. Commuters from high-density areas now appear more stunned than angry that their lifestyles have so rapidly deteriorated. This -- along with undernourishment and sheer exhaustion -- may account for their seeming acquiescence. If the situation worsens, however, we suspect that stoicism could give way to rage.

Sullivan